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WASHINGTON POST
19 February 1987

Senate Committee Votes To Halt Aid to Contras

Legislation Calls for More Latin Peace Moves

By Helen Dewar
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted yesterday to halt U.S. aid to Nicaraguan guerrillas as the Democratic-controlled 100th Congress opened what is expected to be a yearlong fight with President Reagan over the troubled contra-aid program.

Dividing largely along party lines, the committee approved the funding cutoff, 11 to 9, as part of a broader measure seeking more aggressive peace efforts in Central America and \$300 million in new economic assistance to El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras and Ecuador.

Supporters of the legislation conceded that Congress would be unable to override a presidential veto but characterized it as a demonstration that Democrats have a "positive alternative" to Reagan's policy and are willing to fight for it.

"The longer we delay . . . the worse the situation gets," said Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.), who described the contra insurgency as "a war that cannot be won and cannot serve our national interests."

While the administration is unlikely to lose any of the \$100 million in military and related aid to the contras that Congress approved last year, it faces an uphill battle to win congressional approval for \$105 million in aid for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1, according to congressional leaders and contra-aid foes on the committee.

To end current aid, including a

final installment of \$40 million available this month, Congress needs a two-thirds vote of both chambers to override a veto.

But a simple majority of the two could block appropriation of funds for next year, and contra-aid opponents said yesterday's committee vote signals that the program's days are numbered.

The committee-approved measure, sponsored jointly by Sens. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) and Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.), would not specifically block the final \$40 million. Instead, it would bar funding after its enactment, including whatever is left in the pipeline for this year.

A separate resolution to block the \$40 million could be introduced after Reagan certifies that the aid is needed. Such certification is expected today but may be delayed, in part because of current turmoil in contra leadership ranks, according to congressional sources.

While Republicans controlled the Senate, it had been the mainstay of congressional support for the contra program. But, with the Democratic gain of eight seats in the November elections and subsequent controversy over diversion of Iranian arms-sale profits to aid the contras, the Senate is now believed to lean against the program.

Dodd estimated that 50 to 55 of the 100 members will vote against contra funding for next year. But he was less certain about his proposal for this year, saying the \$300 million in new aid for Central American

democracies could encounter objections on budgetary grounds.

In yesterday's voting, Republicans voted for an alternative proposal by Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) to approve the \$300 million without cutting off contra aid. But Democrats opposed it, and it died on an 11-to-9 party-line vote.

In the final vote, all Democrats except Edward Zorinsky (D-Neb.) voted for Dodd's proposal while all Republicans except Daniel J. Evans (R-Wash.) opposed it.

In related votes, the committee rejected, 11 to 9, a proposal by ranking Republican Jesse Helms (N.C.) to delay further aid until contra leadership struggles are "freely" resolved "without any direct or indirect intervention from the U.S. State Department or the Central Intelligence Agency."

Helms said that Adolfo Calero, viewed as more conservative than other contra leaders, was forced from United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) leadership by the State Department to "appease certain legislators who don't support aid to the freedom fighters anyway."

The committee also approved, then dropped, a proposal by John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) to condition aid to the other Central American countries on progress toward specific democratic reforms, which some members said would preclude most countries from receiving U.S. aid.

"Let's be blunt about it. For the first 76 years of its history, our country could not have qualified for aid under this provision," said Evans, citing human-rights violations ranging from sedition laws to slavery.